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Stephen S. Rosenfeld

# Nicaragua: Inching Toward Negotiations?

The new element in Reagan administration thinking about Nicaragua is the sense that the policy isn't working and time is running out. The president remains determined to rally support for the military track, but senior aides are trying to inch him toward a negotiating track. Some see this as a way to win congressional support of contra aid, but others wonder if negotiations can actually start to steer Nicaragua toward a democratic path.

Critics say Reagan has no interest in negotiations. This is a bum rap. Reagan has entered the process. It's that the result he seeks is restoration of the full democratic promise of Nicaragua's revolution. This is noble but so unrealistic—it amounts to a demand for the Sandinistas' removal from power—as to have given rise to the widespread belief that Reagan is not serious.

Any change now would mean retreat from the demand for a comprehensive security-plus-democracy agreement whose parts go into effect simultaneously and which is readily verifiable. Negotiations, rather than ensuring the Sandinistas' political demise, would leave them with some chance to cheat and stay in power. This is what makes it so painful for Reagan and the many others who do not want to see consolidation of a Sandinista dictatorship of the Soviet-allied left.

But negotiations would also give the Nicaraguan opposition some chance to preserve and widen its position—a chance that the contras with their uncertain military and political capabilities do not otherwise seem able to provide. This proposition, long argued by people outside the administration, is coming to be viewed a bit more sympathetically by some inside.

Sen. Chris Dodd, a policy critic who argues for a transition from contra aid to containment, suggests that a change in Sandinista politics may not come "in our lifetime." From Secretary of State George Shultz down, however, administration officials demand and thus define as feasible a measure—a so-far undefined measure—of immediate Sandinista political change.

The peace plan currently up front is Costa Rica's. There is also a partly competitive, partly complementary Guatemalan proposal for a democratically elected Central American parliament. Costa Rican President Oscar Arias accepts the Reagan premise that the essence is to tip Nicaragua toward democracy. But Arias also is anxious simply to get things moving, and this stirs administration fears that he'll be too soft. The pattern of such fears is what gets Reagan accused of being against negotiations, though the United States could do nothing if Costa Rica went its own way.

Reagan is a lame duck who cannot count on Congress to sustain the contras or on the contras to sustain his policy, who has lost any option for an American invasion, whose policy is being further sapped by the Iran-contra hearings and who cannot possibly look forward to the taunt and self-reproach that in eight years he left the Sandinistas more deeply ensconced in power.

The late William Casey, an ardent contra advocate with Oval Office access, is gone from CIA; the acting director is an analyst, the director-designate an unlikely policy player. Patrick Buchanan, a Nicaragua red hot, is gone from the White House. The new chief of staff, Howard Baker, is a nonideological conservative sensitive to discomfort on Capitol Hill. The new national security adviser, Frank Carlucci, has, unlike his predecessor, read himself deeply into the negotiations picture. At the State Department is George Shultz, a former Marine but one whose method of negotiation is becoming visible on the Soviet-American scene. Shultz's man for Latin America, Elliott Abrams, is a hard-liner able to see the reason to try for a negotiated endgame. The chief Nicaragua negotiator, old pro Philip Habib, has a notion of what a successful negotiation could be about.

I bounced these considerations off some knowledgeable people and they were skeptical—some about Reagan, others about the Sandinistas. But a tempting symmetry awaits diplomatic approach. The United States fears a negotiation would let the Sandinistas consolidate their power. Sandinistas fear it would cost them their revolution. A process that both entered nervously sounds right.